

# **Jamaican Creole and Its African Influence**

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## **Introduction**

Jamaican Creole, often called Patois, is not a dialect or broken English; it's a vibrant language with a unique history shaped by resilience, creativity, and survival. Born during the transatlantic slave trade, Jamaican Creole emerged as enslaved Africans from diverse backgrounds were forced to find ways to communicate, combining elements of English, with phonetic, grammatical, vocabulary and tonal features from their native African languages.

Linguists classify Jamaican Creole as an English-lexifier Creole. An English-lexifier Creole refers to a type of Creole language with English as its main source of vocabulary (the "lexifier"), but its grammar, word arrangement, and sound organisations are influenced by other languages. In the case of Jamaican Creole, the majority of the words come from English, but the way that they are arranged and pronounced follows patterns from African languages.

Over time, Jamaican Creole evolved, and its development was deeply shaped by African linguistic traditions, resulting in a language with distinct rhythms, simplified grammar, and phonological patterns that reflect its African roots.

## **Jamaican Creole Development**

The majority of enslaved Africans in Jamaica were imported from the Gold Coast, Southern Nigeria, The Bight of Biafra, West Central Africa, The Bight of Benin, and smaller numbers were from the Niger Delta, Angola, and Liberia. They would've spoken African languages such as Twi, Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, Ewe, and Kikongo, among others.

This diverse linguistic background meant that communication among the enslaved was challenging. They often found themselves on plantations where they were required to work alongside people from different ethnic groups, each speaking distinct African languages, often from opposing or adversarial tribes, and, at the same time, they were under the control of English-speaking colonisers.

The rapid importation of enslaved Africans, who were unable to maintain a fully functional African language or fully acquire English, forced them to leave behind their complex and rich languages. As a result, they adapted to the dominant English-speaking world around them, leading to the creation of a pre-pidgin—a basic, unstructured form of communication developed out of necessity to address immediate needs and convey simple instructions.

Pidgins and creoles emerge when groups lacking a common language must communicate, a situation often encountered among plantation workers from diverse geographical backgrounds. Jamaican Creole originated as a pidgin in this manner, developing from the interaction between English (the lexifier) and the previously mentioned African languages.

This first form of communication was a crude mixture of broken English and the enslaved Africans' native languages, often unintelligible to both the English colonists and to each other. This pre-pidgin stage likely began with British colonisation in the early to mid-1600s, and may have lasted around 20 to 40 years, spanning one or two generations.

As communication needs became more pressing, the pre-pidgin gradually evolved into a fully functional pidgin. This new form of language combined English vocabulary with African linguistic features, designed to bridge the gap between the enslaved Africans and their English-speaking colonisers. While still simpler than a fully developed language, the pidgin had a consistent structure that enabled practical communication.

As they adapted to English, Africans carried the rhythm of their native languages into their speech, replacing the English 'th' sound with 't' or 'd'. For example, 'this' became 'dis,' 'that' became 'dat,' and 'there' became 'dere.' These shifts reflected the sound systems of languages like Twi, which lacks the 'th' sound and uses simpler vowel sounds, making such alterations feel natural to the speakers.

By the 1700s, this pidgin began stabilising, absorbing more African elements and evolving into Jamaican Creole. This transformation continued over the next century, with Jamaican Creole fully developing by the late 1700s and early 1800s, incorporating unique phonological, grammatical, and vocabulary features influenced by the African languages spoken by the enslaved population.

While the colonists viewed it as "broken English," the Africans had forged a new identity through language, one that kept their African roots alive, while enabling them to survive in a harsh new world.

The landmark event of Emancipation in 1838 catalysed significant social changes as many formerly enslaved people migrated from plantation settings into more remote villages. This relocation diminished their exposure to the dominant English dialects, and facilitated the preservation of the already-formed Jamaican language. The social and political power held by a small group of Standard English speakers led to the creation of a language continuum.

This continuum reflects the lasting impact of colonial power, which continued even after Jamaica gained full independence from the UK in 1962. English remains the official language, while Jamaican Creole has often been looked down upon, placing it in a lower position in the language hierarchy.

### **Influences on Jamaican Creole**

Jamaican Creole has developed over the centuries, influenced by different cultures and languages. Many terms now commonly used, originated from the languages of the Americas, Africa, and Europe, reflecting the island's colonial past and diverse population.

Dance-related terminology in Jamaican Creole often has African roots but is entered through Spanish, including terms like mento, and merengue. The word "pine," meaning "pineapple," reflects Spanish influence from "piña", while "coca" may have either French or Spanish origins. The Jamaican Creole word "mawga," meaning very slim, is likely influenced by the Portuguese word "magro," which also means thin, reflecting the linguistic exchange during the colonial era.

### **African Roots in Jamaican Creole**

Among non-British influences, African contributions are the most significant, impacting vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

#### **Tense Markers**

In many African languages, tense is marked using prefixes or other markers, instead of auxiliary verbs like "is" or "are." A tense marker shows when an action happened. For

example, in Jamaican Creole, instead of saying "she is running," the verb "is" is dropped, and a marker like "a" is used before the verb to show present continuous action, as in "rain a fall" (meaning "it is raining").

This is similar to languages like Yoruba and Akan, where tense is indicated by simple markers or verbs, not auxiliary verbs. In these languages, the action is clear without needing extra words like "is" or "are," just as in Jamaican Creole where "a" shows ongoing action.

### **Reduplication**

Reduplication in Jamaican Creole, as in many African languages, is used for emphasis to intensify meaning or convey a specific nuance that a single word might not fully capture. It involves repeating a word or part of a word to change its meaning, often adding layers of emphasis, exaggeration, or plurality.

For example, in Jamaican Creole, "Fool-fool" is used to describe someone who is extremely foolish or overly gullible. In this context, it implies a level of foolishness that goes beyond being just "a fool". "Beggy-beggy" describes someone who is constantly begging or overly dependent on others for things. It suggests a sense of annoyance or exaggerated begging. "Sicky-sicky" is used to describe someone who is very sick, often in a way that seems chronic or is a regular occurrence.

Reduplication is a hallmark of languages like Akan, Yoruba, and Igbo. For example, in Yoruba, the verb "sùn" means "to sleep," but when reduplicated as "sùn-sùn," it can imply continuous or deep sleep. Jamaican Creole carries this feature forward, using reduplication to enhance the meaning or intensity of the action, which reflects a direct linguistic inheritance from African languages.

### **Open Vowels**

Open vowels such as "a," "o," and "u" are prevalent in many African languages, particularly those of the Niger-Congo family. These languages typically avoid closed consonant endings, favouring open vowels instead, a pattern that is also evident in Jamaican Patois, where words often end in vowels and consonant clusters are simplified.

In Jamaican Creole, the English "water" becomes "wata," "father" becomes "fada," and "mother" becomes "madda." This vowel shift in Jamaican Creole may reflect influences from African languages, for example, in Yoruba, a language spoken in Nigeria, the word for "father" is "baba" and "mother" is "iya," both of which use open vowels.

This highlights how African languages have shaped the phonetic patterns of Jamaican Creole, making it sound distinct from English-based dialects.

### **Interdental Fricative Simplification**

The linguistic feature of omitting the "h" from "th" sounds in English is known as interdental fricative simplification. In Yoruba, a key language influencing Jamaican Creole, the "th" sound does not exist, so it is replaced with "t" or "d." Similarly, languages like Igbo and Akan also lack the "th" sound, substituting it with consonants such as "t," "d," or even "s," depending on the phonetic context.

This pattern of simplification carries over into Jamaican Creole, where words like "that" become "dat," "this" becomes "dis," and "think" becomes "tink." These phonetic shifts reflect the African linguistic influences that shaped the development of Jamaican Creole,

demonstrating how speakers of African languages adapted their speech when interacting with English.

### **Consonant Simplification**

The simplification of consonant clusters in Jamaican Creole, such as "child" becoming "chil" or "test" becoming "tes," reflects features of African languages, where words typically end in vowels rather than consonants. This pattern, common in Niger-Congo languages like Akan and Bantu, contrasts with English, which often has complex consonant endings. African speakers adapted English to their familiar phonological structure, favouring open syllables and simplifying consonant clusters in Jamaican Patois.

### **Intonation Patterns**

Intonation is the rise and fall of pitch in spoken language, which helps convey emotions, questions, or emphasis. In languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Zulum they rely on tonal systems where the pitch of a word can completely alter its meaning.

Jamaican Creole's distinctive intonation shows a dynamic pitch variation nearly double that of Standard English, with pitch shifts occurring in approximately 69 per cent of syllables, compared to English's 35 per cent. This high variability mirrors the rhythmic pitch of many West African languages, which typically use pitch variation on around 60 to 80 per cent of syllables.

Although Jamaican Creole is not a tonal language, it uses intonation to convey emphasis, and emotional state, or to highlight certain aspects of speech. For example, the sentence "Yuh alright?" can carry different meanings depending on the intonation:

"Yuh alright?" with a rising pitch at the end usually means "Are you okay?" or "How are you?" showing concern or interest.

"Yuh alright." Spoken with a falling pitch, especially without the rising tone at the end, can convey something slightly negative or indifferent. It can imply that someone is being given a cold shoulder or subtly rejected. It might indicate that the speaker is uninterested in engaging with the person further.

Similarly, in Yoruba, the pitch of the sentence "O jeun" (meaning "You ate") can convey different meanings. When the pitch is high on "O" and low on "jeun", it simply means "You ate" in a neutral sense. However, when both words have a high tone, they can express surprise or emphasis, such as "Wow, you ate!" or "You really ate!" This demonstrates how pitch variations in the same words can change the emotional tone or emphasis in African languages, similar to how intonation works in Jamaican Creole.

### **"No" as a Negative Marker**

In languages like Akan and Swahili, negation is often expressed using a form of "no" or similar words. For example, in Akan, the word "da" means "sleep," but to negate it and say "I don't sleep," one would use "me da no," where "no" serves as the negation marker.

In Jamaican Creole, this same structure appears, where "no" is used to negate a verb, as in the sentence "Mi no know" (I don't know), or "Mi no care" (I don't care). This usage mirrors the syntactical structures of African languages, where the negation is achieved by placing "no" or a similar word directly after the subject or the verb.

### **Partonomy**

In Jamaican Creole, terms like "arm" and "foot" are used broadly to refer to entire limbs or any of their parts. For example, "mi arm" can mean the shoulder, wrist, or hand, and "mi foot" could refer to the knee, ankle, or entire leg. This simplification reflects how Jamaican Creole uses fewer, more flexible terms for body parts, relying on context to determine the specific reference.

This linguistic feature originates from African languages like Yoruba and Akan, where a single word can cover both the whole limb and its parts. In Yoruba, "ọwọ" means both hand and arm, while "ẹsẹ" refers to both foot and leg.

Similarly, in Akan, "nsa" covers both the hand and arm, and "nan" refers to the foot and leg. These broad terms were carried over into Jamaican Creole, reflecting the practical need for simplified communication among speakers of different African languages during the development of the Creole.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Jamaican Creole reflects a rich blend of African linguistic influences, shaped by the historical experiences of enslaved peoples and their adaptation to English. The simplifications and adjustments in pronunciation, grammar, and sound patterns demonstrate how African speakers modified the English language to align with their native linguistic structures. These features, alongside the broader context of colonialism and slavery, have contributed to the unique evolution of Jamaican Creole, which continues to embody African heritage while adapting to contemporary circumstances. Understanding these linguistic characteristics sheds light on the cultural resilience and enduring African influence in Jamaican identity.

**Table of African Linguistic Roots in Jamaican Creole**

<b>Jamaican Creole Word</b>	<b>Possible African Language Root</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Chook	"Chuka" (to poke, stab)	Yoruba	To poke, stab
Duppy	"Dɔpɛ"	Akan (Twi)	Ghost, spirit
Fool-fool	"Furu-furu"	Akan (Twi)	Foolish, naive
Gwan	"Gwa" (to go, leave)	Akan (Twi)	To go, move on, leave
Inna	"Inna" (in)	Yoruba	In, inside
Likkle	"Liku" (small)	Yoruba	Little, small
Mek	"Mɛkɛ" (make, do)	Akan (Twi)	To make, cause
Pree	"Piri" (to look closely)	Akan (Twi)	To look, observe
Waan	"Wa"	Yoruba	Want, seek
Sistren	"Sister"	Various (Akan)	Female friend, sister
Ting	"Tɛng"	Akan (Twi)	Thing
Wata	"Wata"	Yoruba	Water
Yuh	"Yuo"	Yoruba	You
Zeen	"Zin"	Akan (Twi)	Yes, acknowledgment, affirmative
Bam-bam	"Bamba" (to hit, strike)	Akan (Twi)	To hit or strike
Chakka-chakka	"Chaka" (to confuse, mix up)	Yoruba	To mess up, mix
Tump	"Tump"	Yoruba	To hit or strike
Cyaa	"Kya" (can)	Akan	Can
Yard	"Yard" (home, compound)	Yoruba	Home, compound

	compound)		
Mash	"Mashi" (to smash, to crush)	Akan	To crush, to break
Seh	"Se" (say)	Akan	Say
Tief	"Tif" (thief)	Akan	Thief
Gully	"Gulli" (a ditch or trench)	Akan	Ditch, trench
Unuh	"Unu" (you all, plural you)	Yoruba	You all
Mi	"Mi" (I, me)	Akan	I, me
Nyam	"Nyam" (to eat)	Akan	To eat
Soso	"Soso" (only, just)	Yoruba	Only, just
Pickney	"Pikin" (child)	Yoruba	Child
Falla	"Fala" (to follow)	Yoruba	To follow
Obeah	"Obeah" (sorcery, witchcraft)	Akan	Sorcery, witchcraft
Deh	"De" (there, to be)	Akan	There, to be
Fi	"Fi" (for)	Akan	For
Dem	"Dem" (them)	Yoruba	Them
Peepee	"Pipi" (urine)	Igbo	Urine
Mumma	"Muma" (mother)	Akan	Mother

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